The Insecure American

How We Got Here and What We Should Do about It

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44. Featherstone, "Down and Out."

45. David Karjanen, "The Wal-Mart Effect and the New Face of Capitalism," in Lichtenstein, *Wal-Mart*, 143–62.

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Deindustrializing Chicago

A Daughter's Story

Christine J. Walley

When I was fourteen, my world was turned upside down. My mom entered my bedroom and shook my shoulder as I lay sleeping. She said quietly, "Don't worry, it'll be okay. They called the ore boat back, but it'll be all right." I was puzzled why we should be worrying about an "oar boat" but drowsily accepted her reassurances. Only later did I learn that the recall of the ore boat meant that the financial lenders to the Wisconsin Steel Works, where my father worked in a rolling mill, had foreclosed on the property, sending it into bankruptcy. It was a crucial moment of rupture, sharply dividing our lives into a time Before the Mill Went Down and After the Mill Went Down. Wisconsin Steel's collapse in 1980 was also a harbinger of things to come for the Calumet area,[1] once one of the largest steel-producing regions in the world, as well as for the United States as a whole. In the ensuing years, the steel mills in Southeast Chicago would close one by one. As stunned residents strove to assimilate what had happened, some noted bitterly that the situation was even worse than that of the 1930s Great Depression. At least after the Depression, they said, the mills had reopened and people had gone on with their lives. This time, the steel mills were gone for good. Their closing would tear through a social fabric that had sustained generations. Although the midwestern part of the United States may have been hit particularly hard by deindustrialization, what happened in Southeast Chicago is not unique. Over the last quarter-century, variations of such experiences have occurred—and continue to occur—throughout the country, creating a widespread sense of insecurity for countless Americans.

This account of Southeast Chicago and the trauma its residents went through is unabashedly personal. It is a story of my childhood, my family, and the area in which I was raised. Yet I am also writing as an anthropologist. Some might even describe

this work as "autoethnography," or what Deborah Reed-Danahay defines as "a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context."[2] Autobiographies, although focusing on individuals, can be powerful tools to illuminate larger social forces. Yet what I am concerned with here is more particular: the revealing points of awkwardness between the personal stories that we wish to tell and the broader societal narratives through which we are encouraged to make sense of our experiences. Carolyn Steedman's work provides a classic example of what we can learn by paying attention to such tensions.[3] Her raw personal account of growing up working class in post–World War II London shattered romantic, mythical stereotypes of a close-knit British laboring class by pointing to the gap between such assumptions and the experiences of women on the margins such as her mother. Although the stories we tell about ourselves are of necessity built upon, and given meaning through, references to more dominant societal narratives, it is these points of tension and omission that I find most instructive. As we attempt to narrate our lives, where do we feel constrained? What are the discrepancies between our own stories and those that others wish to tell for us? What do such gaps reveal about our social worlds? While autobiography (and the tensions it encapsulates) can illuminate far more than a single life, anthropology can, in return, offer useful tools in the art of self-examination. It does so by encouraging an ethnographic tacking back and forth between the details of personal lives and the collective dynamics that link us, providing greater depth to the stories that we tell about our pasts and our presents, both individually and as a society.

As a kid who thought that Southeast Chicago was the core of the universe, I was almost entirely unaware of outside depictions of my own community. The people who inhabited the TV shows, movies, and books to which I had access seemed to live in a parallel universe that had little to do with me or my family. Consequently, it was an odd sensation to discover later that Southeast Chicago had a certain notoriety, at least among academics. Historically, scholars from the University of Chicago regularly used the nearby working-class or poor neighborhoods on Chicago's South Side for sociological studies of immigrants or racial and ethnic "succession." William Kornblum even conducted research on Wisconsin Steel for his book *Blue Collar Community* during the same period in the 1970s when my father was working as a shearman in the No. 5 rolling mill.[4] Other scholars of deindustrialization have offered accounts of the notoriously shady dealings that contributed to Wisconsin Steel's demise.[5] Nevertheless, the language of social class in academic accounts can, at times, feel distressingly distant from its lived realities,[6] and the kinds of awkward moments with which I am concerned rarely enter the picture. Writing a personal narrative of deindustrialization offers a way to capture what academic accounts often miss and highlights the painful but instructive tensions between individual experience and broader societal understandings.

Although I have wanted to tell this story almost to the point of obsession since I was a teenager, there are obstacles to speaking about growing up white and working class in the United States. Perhaps this should not be surprising in a country where both rich and poor prefer to locate themselves in an amorphous "middle class" and where class differences are often referenced through other kinds of coded language, including those of race and ethnicity. The difficulties in telling this kind of story are instructive, and I have watched other family members struggle with similar questions: How does one find the confidence to believe that one's story is worth telling and that others should listen? How does one find the language to express such experiences or make the words stick to intended meanings? How does one keep one's meaning from being derailed or appropriated by the accounts of more powerful others? In this attempt to tell my own story and that of my family, I have broken the account into two parts—one suggestive of The World Before the Mills Went Down and the other of The World After. The first part offers a history of Southeast Chicago through the personal stories of my grandparents and great-grandparents. These narratives are classic ones of American immigration and labor that feel almost stereotypical in the telling. Yet they also reveal points of tension that are too significant to ignore. The second part gives an account of deindustrialization through my father's experiences, my relationship with him, and the ways in which the shutdown of Southeast Chicago's steel mills transformed us both. With "USA" emblazoned on his baseball cap and his ever-present flannel shirt, my father in many ways epitomized the archetypal steelworker, once a stereotypical image of the white working class. My own story is easily subsumed by archetypal ideas of upward mobility in the United States. Yet the clichéd assumptions associated with such images fail to convey the bitterness of these stories or the places where more powerful societal narratives have acted to destroy the shoots of alternative accounts. In the end, what these interweaving stories add up to is the role that deindustrialization has played and is playing, not only in transforming class in the United States, but in redefining what it means to be "American" in the twenty-first century.

A WORLD OF IRON AND STEEL: A FAMILY ALBUM

Defined by the steel mills that in the 1870s began drawing generations of immigrants to live near their gates, Southeast Chicago has what might euphemistically be described as a "colorful" history. Al Capone once maintained houses and speakeasies in the area because of its convenient proximity to the Indiana state line. My dad would drive me around the neighborhood when I was a child and point out the brick bungalows rumored to have been Capone's and to still have bulletproof windows. Laughingly, he told stories of how one of my great-uncles quit his job as a night watchman after Capone's men showed up one evening and told him not to report to work the next day. One of the defining events in U.S. labor history, the Memorial Day Massacre of 1937, happened on a plot of land across the street

from the local high school that my sisters and I attended. On that Memorial Day, locked-out steelworkers and sympathizers, including my grandfather, massed in protest near Republic Steel, where ten were killed and nearly a hundred wounded by police under the influence of mill management. A federal investigation and subsequent legislation were milestones in allowing U.S. workers the right to unionize. In 1966, Martin Luther King Jr. marched through the streets of Southeast Chicago protesting the deep-seated racial hatred and housing segregation in the area, to the consternation of many of the white working class, including many of my own family members.

What was most striking about growing up in Southeast Chicago, aside from the contentious relationships found among its patchwork of ethnic groups including Scandinavians, Germans, Poles, Slavs, Italians, Greeks, Mexicans, and, later, African Americans, was the neighborhood's dense networks of kinship ties. Many families, like my own, had lived in the mill neighborhoods for generations. When I was growing up, my grandparents lived across the alley from my parents' house, and nearly all my cousins, aunts, and uncles were within walking distance. My sisters and I attended the same grammar school as our parents as well as several of our grandparents and even great-grandparents. At times, the interconnectedness reached near comic proportions. For example, my mother's mother, a widow, eventually married my father's father, a widower, a year before my own parents were married. Despite perplexed looks when I explained that my mother and father had become stepbrother and stepsister as adults, the situation seemed an oddly appropriate expression of the dense social bonds that knit together the mill neighborhoods. At other times, the interconnectedness took on darker overtones. I remember my parents reminiscing about trying to decide as newlyweds whether it was appropriate to attend the funeral of my father's aunt after she was killed by a distant relative on my mother's side, a man who had become mentally unstable after serving in the Korean War and had exploded a bomb in a local department store.

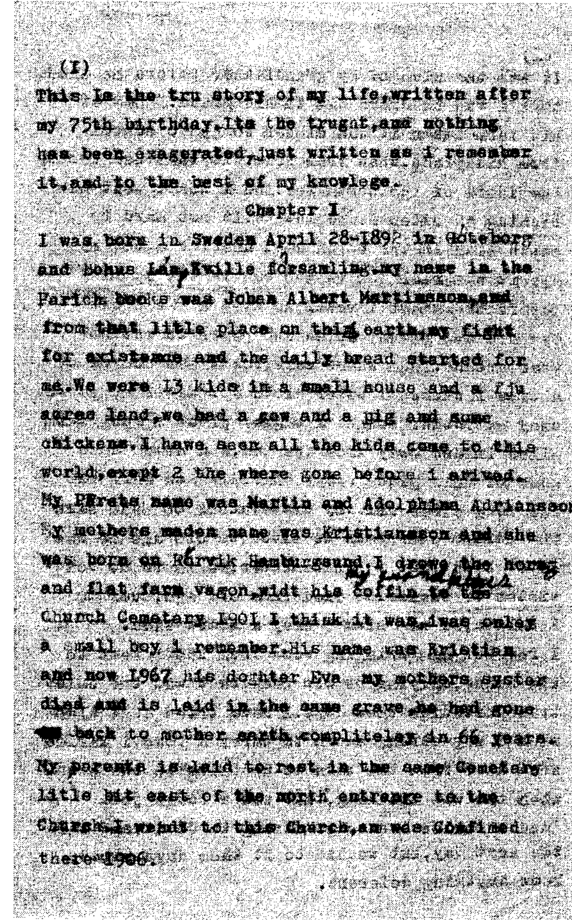
While families were at the root of social life, they also mirrored the divisions found among the white working class more broadly. In many ways, my mother's family approximated the classic immigrant narrative of modest upward mobility, while my father's family reflected the far-less-often-told reality of long-term white poverty. Although the immigrant narrative of my mother's family story was valorized while my father's family's story was swept under the collective national rug, the accounts from relatives on both sides of the family built upon classic American myths of a modern industrial "melting pot" society and, at the same time, regularly contradicted such mythology. The story of my maternal great-grandfather is a prime example. My mother's grandfather, Johan Martinsson, came to Chicago from Sweden in 1910, becoming John Mattson in the process. After his death, my grandmother found hidden in the attic a memoir stuffed in a paper sack that he had written in broken English at the age of seventy-five. The dramatic title *The Strugle* [sic] *for Existence from the Cradle to the Grave* was scrawled across the front. His wanting to tell his story so badly, yet feeling the need to hide it in the attic to be found after his death, has always fascinated me. To me, it suggests not only the ambivalence of wanting to convey—yet being afraid to convey—painful family events but also ambivalence about how to tell a life story that so bitterly contradicted mythic portrayals of immigrants grateful to be on American shores.

John, or, as I knew him, "Big Grandpa," tells a story that both references and contests classic immigrant narratives that were intended to make sense of experiences like his. He recounts how, as a child, he grew up on a farm near Göteborg in Sweden and was apprenticed at the age of eight to a blacksmith. He later alternated odd days of school with hard labor for neighboring farmers. Part of a large and impoverished family of thirteen, he left his community at the age of seventeen along with a group of other Swedes (including the father of his future wife) to find work in America. He worked for a while as a steelworker but was put off by the high death toll of the mills. After receiving a lucky break, he managed to become a carpenter and later, as a union builder and contractor, would help construct buildings throughout South Chicago. Yet in contrast to the mythic accounts of immigration in the United States, he refers to his decision to leave for the United States as a "mistake" and one that "I should never had made if [I] had known what I know today." He continues: "Sweden had peace for 150 years and do not *[sic]* meddle in another nation's affairs. That's more than I can say for my adopted country where I raised my family and worked hard since 1910. I was drafted in the First World War and had a son in the 2nd World War and now a grandson soon of age for Vietnam. When are *[sic]* this going to stop?"[7] In addition to expressing his regret that he ever left Sweden, his story dwells in bitter detail upon harsh economic struggles as well as the festering sores of an unhappy marriage. He conveys the hand-to-mouth existence of his early years in the United States, the utter vulnerability and dependency of those like himself who were without resources, and the cruel insecurities of the life of a laborer.

In my childhood memories, I remember my great-grandfather as an enormous, taciturn man who always wore suspenders and occasionally still played the accordion. In old family movies from the 1940s, "Big Grandpa" can be seen riding a paddleboat-like contraption built by his younger brother Gust. Wearing a suit and hat, he stares at the camera from the industrial wetlands amid the steel mills. In contemplating this and other images, I try to locate the inner turmoil revealed in his writing beneath their impenetrable surfaces. Family lore has it that he tried to move back to Sweden in later years but found himself too heavy to ride a bicycle and came back to the United States. In such stories, the bicycle symbolizes the immigrant's inability to go home, the dilemmas of a life transformed unalterably by the journey and caught betwixt and between.

The women in my mother's family left no written records, but it was they who,

FIGURE 6.1. Cover of *The Strugle for Existence from the Cradle to the Grave*



(I)
This is the tru story of my life,written after
my 75th birthday.Its the trugnt,and nothing
has been exagerated,just written as i remember
it,and to the best of my knowlege.

Chapter I

I was born in Sweden April 28-1892 in Göteborg
and Bohus Län,Kville församling.my name in the
Parich books was Johan Albert Martinsson,and
from that litle place on this earth,my fight
for existence and the daily bread started for
me.We were 13 kids in a small house and a fju
acres land,we had a cow and a pig and some
chickens.I have seen all the kids come to this
world,exept 2 the where gone before i arived.
My Parets name was Martin and Adolphina Adriansson
My mothers maden name was Kristiansson and she
was born on Rörvik Hamburgsund.I drowe the horse
and flat farm vagon,widt his coffin to the
Church Cemetary 1901 I think it was,iwas onley
a small boy i remember.His name was Kristian.
and now 1967 his dogter Eva my mothers syster
dies and is laid in the same grave,he had gone
back to mother earth complitelay in 66 years.
My parents is laid to rest in the same Cemetary
litle bit east of the north entrance to the
Church.I went to this Church,an was Confined
there 1906.

FIGURE 6.2. Page of text from *The Strugle for Existence from the Cradle to the Grave*

in my memory, were always at the center of things. In the early years of the steel mill neighborhoods, men vastly outnumbered women. Nevertheless, some women, like my great-aunt Jenny, ran the boardinghouses where steelworkers and other immigrants lived or, like another great-aunt, worked in the mill cafeterias. Others took in laundry, were waitresses, or cleaned houses for others, including the wealthy who lived in the mansions in South Shore. My grandmother did almost all of these at various points in her life and later supported my mother and uncle as a dentist office receptionist after her first husband died at an early age. In contrast to middle-class narratives that stereotypically portray working-class men as sexist and violent and women and children as their perpetual victims, in my experience it was women who were the powerful beings. They were in charge of the social world that gave life meaning in these mill neighborhoods, binding together kin networks, maintaining churches, schools, and ethnic organizations.[8] While the men in Southeast Chicago might mark ethnic boundaries with belligerence and occasionally violence, the women could draw ethnic boundaries just as real through such acts as making Swedish holiday *glögg* and sausages, managing the Santa Lucia pageants in which we girls dressed up in white robes and silver tinsel, and organizing potlucks for organizations like the Bahus Klubben and the Viking Lodge. Like

Steedman's British working-class mother, who was a Tory and strove for the good things in life, many of the women on my mother's side of the family gravitated toward cultural styles of respectability that they associated with refinement and "classiness." It was this politics of desire for respectability, I believe, that made my utterly apolitical grandmother a Republican in the midst of this quintessential Chicago Democratic machine ward.

While some of my mom's childhood friends married "up" and eventually moved out of the mill neighborhoods to the suburbs, my father's family represented the other side of the white working class. In contrast to the classic immigrant tales of upward striving, they were long-term white poor. Although my father's mother was the child of Czech immigrants from Bohemia, her story is largely missing from the family album. Since it was the women who passed on family histories, her death when my father was barely more than a teenager meant that I grew up knowing almost nothing about her. In one of the few photos we have of her, she is standing next to my grandfather and surrounded by her sons, including my dad, who is positioned on the right. My father's father was—I surmise—originally from Appalachia. Before coming to Chicago to work in the steel mills, his family were tenant farmers and coal miners in southern Illinois. I never knew where they were from before that. When I asked my grandfather (who was known to us as "Little Grandpa" to differentiate him from our maternal great-grandfather), he would answer angrily that we were "American, goddamn it," and tolerate no further questions. Later, I learned that he had asked his own father this same question upon arriving in Chicago and had received the same answer. In a place where nearly everyone was an immigrant from somewhere and in which ethnic affiliations, churches, and organizations were powerful institutions of social life and upward mobility, to be without an ethnic group was a form of deprivation. I only then realized that being "American, goddamn it," was a statement not simply of racism but of the defensiveness of poor whites denigrated as "hillbillies" who were viewed as socially inferior to the incoming immigrant groups and who clung to their Americanness as one of their few badges of status.

In many ways, my grandfather's story is a classic tale of the rise of American labor and the transition from rural origins to the city. A family crisis occurred when his father, ill with "sugar diabetes," was forced off the land in southern Illinois, where he had been a tenant farmer. My great-uncle Arley, then a teenager, rose to the occasion by leading the family to the north in search of opportunities for labor in heavy industry. Arley went first, hitching rides on freight trains and dodging the gun-toting railroad "dicks" (as detectives were then known) to reach Detroit. He then sent the fare for my grandfather, who went to work as a waterboy in the car factories at age sixteen. Most of the family, including my great-grandparents, then relocated to Chicago a few years later. In Chicago, "Little Grandpa" eventually worked for more than forty-five years in an iron foundry, Valley Mould, that sat across the polluted

FIGURE 6.3. "Little Grandpa," my dad, and his mother and brothers

waters of the Calumet River from Wisconsin Steel. Several of his brothers went to work in the other steel mills. Before the unions ameliorated labor conditions, "Little Grandpa" worked twelve-hour shifts, seven days a week, with one day off a month. When someone didn't show up for work, he sometimes worked twenty-four hours straight. One day, a crane operator, who was working twenty-four hours, fell asleep at the controls as my grandfather and his fellow workers were extracting an enormous red-hot casting mold. My grandfather barely managed to scramble out of the way of the swinging tons of hot steel, and he lost part of two fingers of the hand he had thrown up to protect himself. According to my father, my grandfather's sev-

ered fingers were placed in a paper sack, and he was given a nickel for the trolley and told to take himself to the hospital. "Can you believe it?" my dad would say, offering this story repeatedly over the years as an archetypal example of how the "little guy" got screwed. Scoffing at this account and reasserting his own respectability, "Little Grandpa" insisted that he had been brought to the hospital in a proper ambulance. Nevertheless, Valley Mould *was* nicknamed "Death Valley" at this time, and my grandfather could tell stories of men he had seen die. One friend of his had fallen when crossing a plank catwalk across an enormous vat of hot sand. The man succeeded in grasping the chain that my grandfather threw down to him but suffocated before they could pull him out. My grandfather said that the man's body shriveled up from the heat. My father said that it had taken a long time for my grandfather to get over it. Not surprisingly, "Little Grandpa" was an ardent supporter of the unions. "You better believe it," he'd say. He even used to take my father, when he was five or six, to meetings at a tavern called Sam's Place where steelworkers from the smaller steel companies and their supporters, who were fighting for the right to unionize, would gather in the days before the Memorial Day Massacre.

Yet "Little Grandpa's" stories were just as challenging to beliefs on the left as my great-grandfather John's were to those on the right that celebrated America as the land of opportunity. While he fought passionately for his scrap of the pie, he had no time for social causes or political ideology that went beyond a decent wage and a measure of respect. Unions were important to him because with the "big guys" in control "you need a little something to show," a statement with an implicit hint of violence. When I tried to get him to talk about the terrible conditions in "Death Valley" that I had been reading about in history articles, however, he impatiently insisted that "it was all right" and took me down to his workroom to proudly show me the gadgets he had forged with scrap metal during his downtime at the foundry. He was far more interested in discussing the intricacies of ingot molds than the social conditions of the mills. My grandfather's stories were also shorn of idealistic notions of bravery and patriotism that laced the mythic narratives of both the Right and the Left in the United States. When I asked my grandfather what he had done on the fateful Memorial Day when the police started shooting at the protesting steelworkers and their supporters, he looked at me as if to determine whether I was a fool and spat, "What d'ya think I did? I turned around and ran like hell!" When I asked him why he hadn't fought in World War II, he boasted that, after receiving an induction letter, he conspired with his superintendent at Valley Mould to get shifted to the job of crane operator, a category of worker for which the superintendent could claim a deferment. "Hell yes!" he snorted. "What would I want to go to any shitting war for?"

Like many in my family, "Little Grandpa" also never lost the profound ethnic and racial hatreds that characterized the mill neighborhoods, and he never privileged the plight of "the working man" over such prejudices. Over Sunday dinner, he banged his silverware and told how in the old days if you were dating a girl whose families were "bohunks" (Bohemians) or "hunkies" (Hungarians) and you strayed over the wrong side of Ewing Avenue, you'd "better watch out, you'd better believe it!" When I went to say good-bye to my grandfather before leaving for a college study abroad program in Greece, his parting words were, "You watch out for those dagos over there." I smart-mouthed back that there were no dagos in Greece. "Dagos, spics, whatever, they'll get you every time," he glared ferociously at me. In a place where ethnic animosities had long been fed by company practices of hiring the most recent immigrant arrivals en masse as strikebreakers or using them to lower the wages of existing millworkers, ethnic divisions were a profound source of contention as well as of identity and support in my childhood world. As is clear from my grandfather's stories, various factions of European immigrant and native workers had fought among each other before they turned on Mexicans and, later, African Americans as the latest entrants into the mill neighborhoods. The bitterness of such divisions is epitomized by my first distinct memory of a black person. I imagine I was about four or five years old at the time and holding my mother's hand. Near the Swedish Lutheran church we attended, two white neighborhood boys were chasing an African American teenager with a pipe; they were clearly intending to beat him senseless for daring to cross neighborhood lines that were as rigidly enforced as any national border. It was the same hatred that in later years would cause a troubled teenage cousin from my father's side to go off into the woods with his biker buddies and machine-gun portraits of Chicago's first black mayor, Harold Washington. How does one talk about such hatreds without resurrecting every stereotype of the white working class? How does one lash together an understanding of a man like my "Little Grandpa," who would both spout vitriolic hatred and watch reruns of *Little House on the Prairie* on television, TV dinner sitting on his lap, tears streaming down his face, transfixed by nostalgic memories of his own rural upbringing?

During college, I valorized the parts of my grandfather that accorded with romantic leftist labor narratives—his work in the foundry, his union activities and presence at the Memorial Day Massacre. I conveniently tried to ignore those aspects that would make my liberal college friends cringe. (Secretly, I doubted whether most of my college friends would actually like "labor" if they met them in person.) Yet I loved talking to my grandfather. It was almost like stepping into a time machine. He often spoke and acted as if it were still the 1930s. And it wasn't simply a sign of old age; from what everyone said, he had been like that his whole life, as if his world had been arrested at some point when he was in his twenties. Once in the 1990s, outside a neighborhood restaurant on one of Southeast Chicago's main drags, he only half-jokingly pushed my future husband into the shadows of a storefront as a police car drove by. "Watch out. It's the flivver squad," he said in an undertone, as if it were still the Al Capone era and they were young punks afraid

of the cops chasing them and knocking their heads together. He remained feisty until the end. My mom called me once when "Little Grandpa" was in his eighties and told me in an exasperated voice how he had been banned for life from the local Ace Hardware for pulling a penknife on a smart-mouthed employee. A few days before he died at age ninety-two, he expressed his impatience to see deceased loved ones once again in the afterlife. He irritably instructed my sisters and myself to help him put on his best suit, then lay down on the bed to await his death.

My grandfather's life, like those of many in Southeast Chicago, had revolved around the steel mills and the social worlds the mills had helped to create. The steel industry was the reason everyone had been brought together. Like a domineering family member about whom one feels profoundly ambivalent, the mills were both frightening and something upon which everyone depended. Craning my neck from the backseat of our car as we drove past the mills, I would, as a child, try to catch a glimpse of the fires blazing in their innards. There was a stark, overwhelming beauty to the enormous industrial scale of the mills, with vats the size of houses pouring molten rivers of golden steel while gas jets flared through the nighttime sky. At the same time, it was impossible to escape the sooty air and the less visible toxic waste that seeped from heavy industry into the ground and the surrounding river, wetlands, and lakes where I used to go skinny-dipping as a teenager. The steel mills and the union wages the mills paid after World War II had raised both sides of my family—the respectability-seeking immigrants as well as the hard-scrabble white poor—to a stable, almost "middle-class" prosperity. Even my Big Grandpa, for all his supposed regret about immigrating to the United States, enjoyed a degree of economic security in the second half of his life that contrasted sharply with the hardships he had known as a child. While the stories my relatives told sometimes resonated with and sometimes challenged the dominant societal narratives that threatened to overshadow their own, there was a continuity and stability to this world. There was, in both the Calumet region and in the United States as a whole, a widespread belief in future prosperity for oneself and one's family and a sense that both factory owners and workers were bound in a common enterprise that linked them indelibly to places like Southeast Chicago.

IT ALL CAME TUMBLING DOWN: MY FATHER AND THE DEMISE OF WISCONSIN STEEL

I associate the destruction of the steel mills with my father's destruction. I had always identified with my dad. I looked like him. I was sensitive like him, and also, like him, I could throw what my husband refers to as "dagger eyes" on those occasions when I become angry. When I was a child, my mother always told me, "You are your father's daughter," her voice laced with exasperation that I wasn't more like her. Continuously told that I was a "Walley," I took a special interest in my father's

family, about whom my mother was profoundly ambivalent. I was also fascinated by Wisconsin Steel, the fiery place where my father disappeared while working endless night shifts and where he had to wear long underwear under his work clothes as protection from the heat even in the summertime. In later years, I was annoyed when some fellow feminists assumed that girls primarily identified with their mothers. Paying far less attention to the relationship between daughters and fathers, they assumed that if girls identified with men it was ultimately because males were more powerful. In my own case, it was the opposite. I identified with my father because we were both in some ways rebellious outsiders in a domestic world dominated by the senior women in the family, those whom my father jokingly referred to as the "Swedish Army."

My father's own personality was contradictory. On the surface, he had the macho veneer that easily fit stereotypes of the white working-class men of his generation. Born on the dining room table during a snowstorm in the depths of the Depression, he had been a rowdy but playful neighborhood boy. My grandfather once caught him and my Uncle Bill hiding in ditches in the "prairies" near one of Al Capone's speakeasies, trying to catch a glimpse of the action. When he was a teenager, my mother, who was several years younger, admired him from afar. He hung out at the school playground, where he was known as an ace player at Ping-Pong, then a popular pastime. When they froze the schoolyard, he proved to be a beautiful ice-skater as well. My mother relates that he courted her neighbor, an older girl, and would sit with her on her lawn for long hours "picking four-leaf clovers." Yet he was also a "bad boy" sent to a special high school for "juvenile delinquents" (he insisted it was only for ditching school, although I was never fully convinced). At sixteen, he quit school and went to work pumping gas at one of the gas stations that lined the Indiana state border. He also devoted himself to drinking and being unruly with his friends, most of whom had nicknames like "Peg" (who had lost a leg hopping rails) or "Inky" (who had been put in an incubator as a baby). He hopped freighters himself and sometimes ended up in places like Kentucky with no way to get home. It was on a drinking binge in downtown Chicago with his buddy Big Russ that he got the tattoo that I loved as a child. All my male relatives, most of them steelworkers and nearly all veterans, had tattoos. I liked to admire them when they wore undershirts and smoked cigarettes in kitchens at family parties or on the porch in the summertime. My father's tattoo was of a black panther crawling up his arm, with red drops of dye representing blood dripping from where the claws would have entered his arm. When he was in the hospital with lung cancer at the end of his life, his chemotherapy nurses looked at his sagging panther and teased him about how he "really must have been a thing back in the day!"

Yet underneath the tough-guy exterior he was a sensitive, even fragile man, one wounded in so many places that it was impossible to patch him up. A hard life as well as his own father's harshness had fatally damaged him. After he married my

mother, he often chose to stay home during his free time. In a picture taken one Christmas, I can be seen sitting on his lap surrounded by my mother, sister, and an aged "Big Grandpa." As I look at such pictures, I wonder if my father had not always secretly longed for a quiet life; after all, living up to an image of self-assured masculinity was a heavy weight to sustain. As a kid, I tried to extract stories from him of his younger days. His early life seemed glamorous to me, an exciting contrast to the churchgoing respectability of my mother; yet it was a source of embarrassment to him. When I tried to get him to recount thrilling tales of riding the rails, he would instead tell the bitter story of how one time, when he had ended up in Kentucky and phoned his family for help, his father had refused to pay for his fare home. I liked the times when instead of going out to play poker with his brother and in-laws he stayed home and played cards with me and my sisters. It was while playing cards or Ping-Pong in the basement that the joking demeanor of his youth would occasionally reappear. At such times, my sisters and I sometimes managed to extract a good story from him, like how he had lost his corporal's stripe when he was in Germany immediately after World War II. He and a buddy of his had gone AWOL and ended up drinking in a tavern, from which they had to be hauled out by the German police after a fight broke out. At such times, my dad would jokingly intone, "Nicht rauchen in der barren" (No smoking in the bar), the few words of German he had acquired while in the army. Although it was clear that respectability was important to my mother, it was only later that I realized that it was important to my father as well. Perhaps he had seen marrying my mother as a form of upward mobility, an escape from the tumultuous family life of his own relatives. As if to keep us from the fate of the nieces and female cousins on his side of the family, who (shamefully without shame, according to some) became unwed mothers at a young age, he ferociously told us at adolescence that if we got "knocked up" we would be kicked out of the house.

His paycheck from the mills was his source of manhood and self-respect in a world over which he had little control. Going into the mills in the decade after World War II, he never suffered the long hours or low pay that my grandfather had. Instead, he was of a generation that watched the expansion of powerful unions and their representatives with a cynical eye. After the mills went down and newspaper accounts blamed it on U.S. workers wanting "too much" or lacking the work ethic of the Japanese, he made a point of stressing that the average steelworker never made very much money; it was skilled workers who worked long hours of overtime that made the "big money" in the mills. My memories support his contention. A climate of anxiety over money permeates my childhood recollections. When I was about five, I remember my dad coming home from the hospital after a hernia operation from a mill-related injury. I recall drawing him a "get well" card with crayons and taping my own pennies on it in an attempt to prevent him and my mom from fighting over money. Practical and down-to-earth like her own mother, my mom

FIGURE 6.4. Dad, Mom, "Big Grandpa," and me and my sister

was skilled at stretching to make ends meet. But although we had a home, a car, and food, it was never easy for her. I hated the hand-me-down clothes that I was given by a neighbor's grandchild who now lived in the suburbs, and I remember my disappointment at getting a toy guitar Christmas ornament instead of the real one I had asked for—a disappointment she sensed as well. I also hated the fact that my father used his role as male family provider to ground his own authority. I remember him punctuating arguments with my mother with the refrain that since it was he who "paid the bills," he should make the decisions. Although, in retrospect, I recognize his bravado as an attempt to buttress his own losing domestic position, the injustice of it still rankles and has underwritten my own determination never to live without a wage of my own.

Given that his role as family provider was central to his identity, as it was for many men in the area, the closing of the mills devastated my father. Wisconsin Steel was the first mill to close in Southeast Chicago. In some ways, it was the worst closing, certainly the most disorderly. There was a great deal of mystery about what

actually happened. After being assured that their jobs were safe, workers, like my father, who were finishing a shift were simply told to go home, the gates were padlocked by armed guards, and they weren't even allowed to clear out their lockers. Later, the preshutdown sale of Wisconsin Steel to a tiny computer company from California would be deemed a "spurious" transaction by the courts. The former owner, International Harvester, had sold the mill to a company with almost no assets in what, some argued, was an attempt to avoid millions of dollars in unfunded pension obligations. Wisconsin Steel itself was used as collateral on the loan to buy the mill, and the new company appeared to strip the mill of assets and treat it like a "cash cow" in its few years of ownership.[9] Although more than a decade later a class action suit filed by steelworker activists would lead to a partial settlement, many workers lost not only their jobs but part or all of their pensions, their health insurance, and other money and benefits, including vacation and severance pay contractually owed to them. Their last three paychecks bounced.

In an area where neat lawns and never going on public assistance were quintessential points of pride, the stigma of being out of work was traumatic. At first, there was hope that the mill would open again. But over time that hope dissipated. Seven months after the March 1980 closing, steelworkers picketed the home of Mayor Jane Byrne at Thanksgiving with signs reading, "Where's our turkeys, Jane?" As time passed, my dad became increasingly depressed and refused to leave the house. Too wounded to show his face to the outside world, he gradually stopped shaving or changing his clothes. He would sit on the couch or at the kitchen table, with a cigarette continuously poised in his fingers, his fingertips dyed orange from the cheap butts. As my mother screamed about the wasted cigarette money and searched for odd change in the sofa cushions, the acrid smoke killed the houseplants and turned the white ceiling orange. Coming home late at night, I'd find him watching the white fuzz on the TV set.

Yet in retrospect our family considered itself lucky. My father was one of three Wisconsin Steel workers who lived on our block; the second became an alcoholic and died a few years later, and the third attempted suicide. In later years, I would read studies that documented the toll of the mill shutdowns in Southeast Chicago, offering painful statistics regarding depression, suicides, illness, and broken families to back up the personal lived experiences of those we knew. The numbers for Wisconsin Steel were staggering. In 1989, the local *Daily Calumet* newspaper reported that in the years since Wisconsin had been shut down nearly 800 out of 3,400 workers had died, mostly from alcohol and stress-related illnesses, compounded by the lack of health care and high suicide rates.[10] While the shutdowns caused untold social devastation, they also caused neighbors to band together. Some said the situation reminded them of how everyone had depended upon each other during the Depression. While the dense social ties and animosities of Southeast Chicago could be stifling and insular, those same ties could be activated in times of trouble,

providing a last-ditch social safety net for the working class and poor. The wife of the unemployed Wisconsin steelworker across the street would bring over tomatoes from her backyard; her husband got my dad an off-the-books job for a couple days emptying out a warehouse. Another neighbor, feeling sorry for my mother as she struggled to hold things together, secretly left an envelope with $50 in cash in the mailbox; it was anonymous, so as not to hurt my mother's pride.

Like many other wives of steelworkers, my mom went back to work in order to hold our family together financially. My stomach churns when I imagine the experiences of workers with no other adult wage earner at home to fall back upon, including the handful of women steelworkers who were often single moms with kids. After a number of dark and uncertain days following Wisconsin's shutdown, my mother joined many other women in becoming part of a growing army of temporary workers, a cog in the wheel of the economic logic that David Harvey has referred to as "flexible accumulation."[11] After several anxiety-filled years of bouncing between temporary jobs and scrambling to find friends and family to help with rides when there was no money to fix the family car, she found a permanent "temp" position doing clerical work in the blueprint room of a local oil refinery. (She has now worked twenty-three years at the same "temporary" job, much of that time without benefits for herself or the rest of our family.) Although media accounts presented the movement of women like my mother into wage labor as a "new" development in the traditionally gendered division of labor in Southeast Chicago, the trend was actually more of a "return." Like the older female relatives mentioned earlier, women had often worked for money in both formal and informal economies in the early years of South Chicago's mill neighborhoods. Indeed, it was the post–World War II family wages of unionized steelworkers that allowed wives to stay home and thus to achieve the kind of respectability to which previous generations of working-class women (who had been chastised by turn-of-the-century domestic reformers for neglecting their families) had aspired. In the 1980s, many of the wives of former steelworkers went back to work as waitresses, hairdressers, cashiers, salesclerks, bank tellers, receptionists, and clerical workers. Some worked informally out of their homes, making household crafts, holiday decorations, and cakes for extra cash. Although my mom had enjoyed staying home (for her, in contrast to many middle-class suburban housewives, "home" meant being at the center of dense social and organizational networks built over generations), the chance to "get out" and earn some money increased her self-confidence, even as my father's crumbled.

Over the course of the 1980s and early 1990s, as the other steel mills in the area closed one by one, it sometimes felt as if the entire world were collapsing. While most former steelworkers who weren't already retired were now unemployed, the women and men who worked at the local stores, restaurants, and supplier shops often found themselves out of work as well. During these years, my father found occasional work as a janitor or a security guard. Yet these jobs were never stable,

and there was active discrimination against hiring former steelworkers, particularly aging ones.[12] He never held a permanent job again. In general, a cloud of depression and despair seemed to hang over the entire region. While many residents blamed the corporations and government for this social devastation, others, fearful that they had done something wrong, blamed themselves. A few, however, tried to protest. Strikingly, the most cohesively organized steelworkers in Southeast Chicago were African American and Latino. Such individuals were more likely to be supporting extended families, and consequently the loss of their jobs had an even more devastating effect upon their communities. Many were also of a generation that had watched, if not taken part in, the civil rights movement, and some were comfortable with political organizing. Those like my father, who had traded in the fighting spirit of my grandfather's generation for a growing respectability and who came of age disillusioned with the corruption of unions, were often at loose ends. Perhaps protesting seemed too much to them like 1960s-style rabble-rousing. For a region that had sent large numbers of young men to Vietnam and applauded Mayor Daley for cracking together the heads of college "hippies" during the Democratic convention in 1968, there was room for little other than individualized despair and bitterness at being ejected from the American Dream. Years later, my father, apropos of nothing, intoned, "Yeah, we thought we were middle class there for a while. We were almost middle class."

What do I myself remember from this time? I recall local community groups bringing my family and those of other unemployed steelworkers free turkeys and care baskets during the holidays. I remember the inedible government-issue free cheese given to steelworkers after the mills went down, the thought of which, even now, makes me feel nauseated. I remember how, at a time when the waves of deindustrialization hitting the Midwest still seemed unfathomable, a newly elected President Ronald Reagan (a man many steelworkers had voted for) would seek to cut back unemployment benefits, including for the victims of plant closings.[13] When Reagan died in 2004, I was shocked by the resurgence of bitterness that I felt toward the man. It was not the resentment of an adult calculated from an abstract political philosophy, but the painful disillusionment of a fourteen-year-old. I remember thinking at the time, with a sudden realization, like the stab of a knife, that those in power did not care about me or my family: our lives were meaningless to them. It was a brutal lesson that would haunt me in later years. I also remember trying to help relieve my parents' burden of providing by trying to take care of myself. I did odd jobs after school and even went to the local ward boss (a figure who still existed in the steel mill neighborhoods) and asked for an age exemption so that I could work on the government CETA program for poor youngsters. Although my father explained that I might have to distribute political flyers in return for the favor, the summer job helped me buy my own school clothes and supplies. When I later read the literature on deindustrialization, it was easy to recognize myself in the accounts

of those children who tried to grow up quickly in an attempt to help shoulder the responsibilities of their careworn parents.

However, I am somewhat ashamed to admit that my most overwhelming reaction was to try to escape. I wanted to run away from the clouds of depression hanging over my father, my parents' home, and Southeast Chicago in general. I turned my long-standing habit of reading and daydreaming to use in searching out escape routes. I sent for a brochure on a girls' boarding school on the East Coast (something unheard of in Southeast Chicago), and I remember staring longingly at photos of rich-looking, well-fed girls in uniforms who sat around reading books on neatly manicured lawns. Then came a moment of freak chance. A friend, the daughter of a local firefighter, had a brother who managed to attend the University of Chicago after graduating from a local Catholic high school. His college roommate told her about a New England prep school called Phillips Exeter Academy. When I decided to apply, my mom humored me by taking me for a required standardized test in downtown Chicago. The test was given in a private school, where I sat intimidated and frightened by the alien environment and wealthy students. Nevertheless, months later, a heavy piece of stationery with official Exeter letterhead informed me that I had been awarded a full scholarship. In retrospect, I am uncomfortably aware that it was my father's fall that unexpectedly made me a candidate for elite schools concerned with diversity.

My parents, however, refused to let me go. The idea of sending a child away to school, much less halfway across the country, seemed like an act of cruelty to many parents in Southeast Chicago. But there were deeper reasons as well. When I yelled at my father, who was then working temporarily as a janitor, and demanded that he tell me why I couldn't go, he responded, almost in tears, "Because when you come back, you'll look down on me for being a janitor!" His words and the pained look on his face are imprinted on my memory. Yet I was determined to make my escape. My mom, convinced that I was simply causing trouble, complained about me to our sympathetic family doctor. Unlike my parents, he knew of Exeter's reputation and demanded that she let me go. At the time, I attributed the fact that my parents finally relented to his intervention. But once again in retrospect, I suspect that the real reason was both more mundane and more troubling. At a point when my parents were fearful of losing their house and openly worried about the possibility of having to send me and my sisters to live with relatives, the brute economic fact that my expenses would be paid for and there would be one mouth less to feed at home was critical. In the days ahead, a couple of my former teachers at the local grammar school took me shopping and bought me some clothes, a new winter jacket, and a portable typewriter. My uncle, whose job was still safe at the local Ford plant, lent my father his blue pickup truck, and the entire family drove me across the country to New Hampshire.

Although I had made my escape almost exactly on my sixteenth birthday, it was

a far rockier and more painful trek than I could have imagined or than is commonly found in the American mythology of upward mobility. It left me saddled with lifelong feelings of guilt. At a time when my little sister at home was making extra visits to my grandparents' house in the hopes of getting something to eat besides the hotdogs that had become my family's daily fare, I was catapulted to the other end of the American class spectrum. I found myself sitting in classes in colonial buildings of brick and marble with students with names like Getty, Firestone, Packard, and Coors. My euphoria at escaping soon disintegrated into a profound dislocation. In a country where race and ethnicity are highly elaborated categories but class is not, there was no recognition that the transition might be difficult for a white working-class girl. If, according to American mythology, all I had previously lacked was opportunity, now that opportunity had presented itself, shouldn't I be fine? The radical disjunctures in this transition—the profound social differences that I had no way to articulate—created an unnamable and painful sense of rupture. It is ironic that when I later traveled outside the country for the first time on a college-year abroad program, I remember feeling no culture shock at all. The people I met in Greece reminded me of my Mediterranean neighbors in Southeast Chicago. Even if I had felt "culture shock," however, it would have been explainable, an acknowledgment that cultural and ethnic differences are recognized to exist. Instead, it was the class journey from Southeast Chicago to Exeter that was by far the most profoundly dislocating one of my life and the one most difficult to articulate in terms that others would recognize. This state of being betwixt and between, an unacknowledged class "halfie," to paraphrase Lila Abu-Lughod's terms,[14] would later lead me to try to use anthropology as a means to explain the world to myself.

The sense of dislocation, and at times humiliation, that I felt at Exeter emerged in countless small incidents. In classes, I was startled by the self-confidence of my fellow students, their belief that their words mattered, their relish in articulating abstract ideas in a mode I found foreign. I tried to contribute to class conversations, taking an entire class period to work up the necessary bravery. Red in the face, heart hammering by the time I managed to get something out, I was constantly afraid that I would speak in the ungrammatical diction that was my first language. I remember sitting one afternoon on the well-tended lawn outside my dorm with my housemates, including a classmate from Greenwich, Connecticut, who was dressed in expensive, preppy clothing. She stared in perplexity at a seemingly unfashionable, polyester-clad "townie" from the working-class town of Exeter who happened to be walking past (a woman who to me bore a comforting resemblance to my own mother) and wondered aloud, "What is wrong with people in this town?" Trapped in my own insecurities, I cringed inside and said nothing. I remember housemates good-naturedly telling anecdotes of their families, but when I would try to reciprocate, revealing a bit of what was happening with my family, there would instead be an awkward silence. My story was a "downer" that simply made people feel uncomfortable (and perhaps secretly guilty?); I quickly learned to remain silent. At the end of such days, I would go to the music practice rooms on campus where I was learning to play the harpsichord and would cry in the only truly private space I could find. My sense of dislocation eventually turned to anger. How was it that there could be places where privilege was so utterly taken for granted? By what right did some people enjoy such ease when others' lives were being ripped apart in places like Southeast Chicago? For a while, I even tried to hate my classmates and their parents. After all, weren't their parents among the business elite who made decisions like closing my father's mill? Weren't they the ones who stood to profit as their investment shares rose in the conglomerates that had once owned the steel mills? But it didn't work; I was forced to admit that I liked many of my classmates. When the father of one housemate, a descendent of the wealthy DuPont family, visited and took us out to dinner, I hoped I could despise him. But he was kind and attentive, and I was ashamed of myself.

I tried to protest, to find a voice to tell my own story in other ways. In my creative writing class, I wrote a tale about a man who could barely read, a character whom I can now admit was a melodramatic exaggeration of my father. (Although I never saw my father read a book or write a letter and although my mother euphemistically described his literacy skills as "limited," he obsessively read the tabloid newspapers his entire life.) Painfully aware of the presence of one of the Getty boys in my class, I had written this story in a spirit of defiance, hoping to salve my own pain by surreptitiously pricking at his privilege. (He remained imperturbable.) I was asked to speak to alumni as a scholarship student and wrote out on three-by-five cards a speech that I considered a manifesto. I wrote about Southeast Chicago and stated that the people I grew up with were no less intelligent or worthy than those who went to schools like Exeter. In my mind, it seemed a bold attack, although reading it back years later it instead seems overly timid and polite. On the day I gave the speech, I cried and couldn't get through it. Afterwards, instead of responding to it as the attack I intended, several alumni came up and told me what a good speech I had written and that they were proud of me. Ashamed that I was grateful for their praise even when I had been actively courting their anger, I smiled back in confusion. Later, I came to realize that they could not hear the story of class I wanted to tell—a story of injustice and anger at class inequalities in the United States couched in the self-righteousness of a sixteen-year-old—because it was too readily subsumed by the broader narrative of America as a land of opportunity. For the assembled alumni, my own presence at Exeter merely confirmed this; even better for the liberal-minded, my speech had acknowledged those left behind. I felt trapped by my inability to find an object upon which to vent my rage, trapped by my inability to find my own voice, trapped by an inability to be heard.

As difficult as it was during those two years at Exeter, it was even more difficult to come home. On vacations, my parents never asked me about life at school and

pretended that it didn't exist. Like a chameleon, I tried to assimilate into the neighborhood again. When my father angrily told me to stop using such big words, I let my sentences drift back into a semigrammatical form out of fear that I would confirm the worries he had revealed before I went to Exeter. During the summers, I worked multiple jobs, once again including a stint on the government-sponsored CETA program. The tutoring program was housed in the local grammar school I had attended, yet most of the other tutors were African American teenagers bused in from poorer parts of Chicago's South Side. Although we were hired to tutor younger children, the school's Italian American vice principal was clearly afraid of my black teenaged co-workers. In the long downtime in the periods before and after our charges arrived, he would force us to sit in silence with our heads on the desk so we wouldn't cause trouble. I remember sitting there, my head lying on the same wooden desks with holes for inkwells that my parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents had used. I thought about how only a few weeks earlier I had been in the marbled and red-carpeted assembly hall at Exeter being lectured on how I was one of the future leaders of America. Now I was sitting with my head on a desk, an object of distrust, someone to be controlled. I didn't know how the African American teenagers around me could stand it. Here were all the paradoxes. The white working class, including my own family and that of the Italian vice principal, were the victims of class in a way I had never imagined before I left Southeast Chicago. Yet, as one of them, I couldn't comfort myself with romantic platitudes. The respectability, as it were, of the white steel mill neighborhoods was built up by a hatred of those on the next rung below. Victims, in other contexts, can be abusers. Just as when I met my friends' parents at Exeter, the only way I could find to stand such tensions was by an act of dissociation: one had to hate the "thing"—class injustice or racism—without hating the people who embodied it. Otherwise, one could find reasons to hate all of humanity. In later years, anthropology would become my route to try to understand what caused such hateful social realities. It would appeal to me, not only for the insights it offered, but also for the way it leavened such insights with a sense of human sympathy.

At the time, however, I attempted to escape such tensions by running away again. I chose to go to a small liberal arts college in California that I had indifferently picked out of my roommate's guidebook to colleges. It was as far away from both Chicago and New England as I could go. Still, there was no escape. For the twenty-five years between the demise of Wisconsin Steel and my father's death, he and I both remained obsessed by the shutdown of the steel mills and psychologically unable to get past its trauma. We each had difficulty expressing the object of our obsession in our own way. After entering graduate school in anthropology, I decided to write my master's thesis about the deindustrialization of Southeast Chicago, in what I hoped would be an act of catharsis. Yet I found that it was easy to use academic jargon as a way to distance myself from my adolescent anger, a pain that I couldn't leave behind but didn't want to relive. For my thesis, I conducted taped interviews with numerous people in Southeast Chicago, including my dad, mom, sisters, and grandfather. This material, upon which the present account is partially based, contained some surprises.

For a man who talked incessantly and with unmitigated bitterness about how they should have put him in his grave when they shut the mill down, my father had little to say when I interviewed him. He answered in monosyllables or brief sentences with no elaboration. I think he was afraid that putting himself on the record would get him into trouble with some authority, the vague powers-that-be that existed in the world beyond Southeast Chicago, which he respected but which also oppressed him. Yet in retrospect I think he was even more scared that he had nothing of value to say. A man whose self-respect had been pummeled by the mill closings decades before, he had no confidence that his words were worth listening to. This tendency came out even more strongly a few years later when I began making a video documentary about Southeast Chicago with my filmmaker husband. On the occasions when my husband would pull out the camera, my father would at first demur and say he didn't want to be on tape. Then, unbidden, he would start talking to the camera, telling it his story and justifying his view of the mill shutdowns. Perplexed at first, we gradually realized that he liked the feeling of validation that having the camera listen to him gave him but did not have the confidence to make it "official." So we videotaped him with minimal equipment, all of us locked in the pretense that we weren't doing anything. When my father saw a short piece of the video later, he asked to replay the tape and nodded in vigorous agreement with his on-camera persona. It proved to be an odd sort of conversation with himself. It was my husband who spotted the pattern and the irony. Like my great-grandfather who hid his memoir in the attic, my father couldn't escape his own ambivalence about speaking. Neither could I. We all shared both a desire and an inability to speak—fears that could be named and those that escaped naming. Perhaps this struggle to recount my own story—and theirs—is an attempt to break free, at least for a moment, from a history of such fetters.

The neighborhoods of my childhood are now very different. The steel mills of Southeast Chicago are now all closed, some for more than twenty-five years. Even the few mills that have continued across the state line in Indiana have done so with radically fewer workers (and, in a throwback to another time, one has even reinstituted the twelve-hour workday that my grandfather fought so hard against). As a whole, the Calumet region is permeated by a sense of nostalgia for the lost era I knew briefly as a child. It is strange to think that the history of only a few generations of my own family would nearly span the rise and fall of heavy industry in Southeast Chicago, as well as in much of the United States. My immigrant great-grandfather's venture

into the mills shortly after the turn of the twentieth century, my grandfather's struggles in the early union era, and the deindustrialization suffered by my parents' generation traced the history of an industry and a way of life that would prove far more ephemeral than any could have imagined. In today's Southeast Chicago, toxic brownfields now extend over vast tracts of land in between the increasingly broken-down wooden clapboard houses and brick bungalows of former steelworkers. What sociologists once clinically labeled "urban succession" has continued. As newly arrived Mexican immigrants and African Americans increasingly make their homes in this depressed area, many members of the former white working class have moved over the state line into Indiana. It is instructive that since the demise of the steel mills the Calumet region has been characterized by the growth of two industries: toxic waste dumps and, across the Indiana border, floating gambling casinos. The flashing neon signs of the lakefront casinos that now light up the skyway at night appear as none-too subtle symbols of the emergence of a new form of risk-centered society in the United States, one characterized by levels of insecurity that my forebears thought they had long left behind.

The physical absences of the steel mills, not surprisingly, have been paralleled by equally prominent holes in the social fabric of the region. Just as jobs in heavy industry were once the primary means for working-class and poor Americans to enter the expanding post–World War II "middle class," the loss of such jobs has played a central role in the growing levels of social inequality found in the United States. In the postindustrial landscape of the Calumet region, such divisions are apparent even among the two branches of my own extended family. While some of my cousins on my father's side have been thrown back into hard-core poverty, living in trailers, trying to make do, limited to minimum-wage jobs or the informal economy, my cousins on my mother's side have become more suburbanized. Some have used positions as skilled laborers to move up to jobs increasingly dependent on computer technology; one has gone back to college and is now a businessman. Both sides, however, find themselves worried about job security as well as the skyrocketing costs of health care and housing at the start of a new millennium. In contrast to the world of diminishing inequalities that my parents' generation had believed in—one in which we would all be middle class—the future now appears as a world of expanding economic disparities with heightened stakes for both success and failure.

As I read over this account, the question of where to attribute blame for the social devastation caused in places like Southeast Chicago looms as large for me as it did while I was at Exeter. I find that as I try to answer this question, my pronouns, almost inevitably, begin to tack back and forth between the "I" of the "autoethnographer," the daughter of the steelworker, and the "we" of American society that is the concern of pundits and social analysts. Of course, blue-collar workers and their families debated the larger causes of deindustrialization as much as did journalists

and academics. I recall various family members and neighbors during the 1980s and 1990s trying to ascertain where to lay the "blame." Some steelworkers, like my father, vented their ire in equal measure upon the government and the steel companies. During the Cold War and even before, the steel companies had preached ideas of a corporate "family" that promised ongoing commitment to the communities where their factories were located. Yet, some residents charged, hadn't the corporations sold them out for a cold profit when convenient, while politicians failed to defend them? Others turned their worries inward. Perhaps, as the newspapers suggested, they hadn't worked hard enough after all; could this, somehow, have been their own fault? Were they greedy to have wanted to be middle class? Many whites turned their anger on more socially vulnerable others. Some men asked how, after they had fought in world wars, the government could abandon them while it helped welfare moms (read: African Americans) who didn't want to work. Even the working-class African Americans and Latinos I knew joined in a variation on this chorus: Why, they asked, should the United States spend so much money on international aid helping countries "over there" when there was such need at home? But hidden beneath the apparent selfishness of these bitter complaints was a common demand for respect: "We are good citizens; we are human beings; how can we be abandoned as if our lives meant nothing?"

In their most pensive moments, some steelworkers I knew wondered whether the demise of the steel industry wasn't simply inevitable, part of an evolutionary transformation, much as journalists and academics suggested when they used the language of globalization. One neighbor and former U.S. Steel employee followed an angry diatribe against government and corporations with a deflated sigh of resignation. "Was it simply the end of an era," he asked, "like the passing of the steam engines or horses and buggies?" While offering the benefit of a clarity based on historical inevitability, such interpretations failed to acknowledge that particular social groups, with American leaders at the forefront, had played a central role in creating the domestic and international laws, institutions, and market dynamics that would be known in shorthand as "globalization." Elite accounts of this phenomenon held multiple blind spots. When well-off Americans in the 1980s and 1990s celebrated such trends and pondered whether sending factory jobs abroad might bring positive forms of development to other parts of the world, they often downplayed the fact that such shifts would come largely at the expense of one segment of the American population. At the same time that the American working class was being catastrophically undermined, the wealthy in the United States were becoming far wealthier. Such assumptions were problematic for other reasons as well. Although many U.S. steel mills did not so much "run away" to other countries as leave the playing field while their parent companies searched for greater profits elsewhere, the phenomenon of deindustrialization in general demonstrates an insidious logic widely remarked upon by critics. As factory production relocates

to wherever labor is cheapest, the factory jobs shipped to Mexico may not stay there but leave for China, while those in China, in turn, leave for Bangladesh and Vietnam. Just as the downward spiral of the search for ever cheaper wages has punched gaping holes in the American Dream in this country, it holds out the possibility, not only of higher standards of living, but of similar traumas of "creative destruction" and heightened inequalities in other locales.

Although it is important to recognize that governments and corporations are not exempt from the exigencies of global economic logics (even as they participate in their creation), the key question is how the United States, as a society, has dealt with these pressures. Have we sought to direct such transformations in ways less destructive to those made vulnerable in the process, or have we instead embraced such transformations and even forced them upon ourselves as well as other parts of the world? Have we paid attention to those whose lives have been battered in their wake? As a college professor and social scientist, I am expected to participate in public conversations about American society and the direction in which it should head. Given my background, I am painfully aware of the class privilege involved in such assumptions and the number of voices that are ignored in such debates. Yet in making the leap from the "I" of the autoethnographer to the "we" of U.S. society, I hope to underscore that the "we" made up of a concerned American citizenry also need to reclaim our ability to speak.

NOTES

This article is dedicated to the memory of my father, Charles William Walley (1931–2005). My deepest thanks to my mother and sisters for their love and for allowing me to share this story. I would also like to thank my other relatives, neighbors, and friends in Southeast Chicago who shared similar experiences. My gratitude also extends to my husband, Chris Boebel, for his perceptiveness in first suggesting the problem of speaking as a central issue in my own family life. It was his idea to use it as a motif in this essay as well as in the documentary film, *Exit Zero,* that we are jointly making about Southeast Chicago. I am grateful to Faye Ginsburg and Owen Lynch, who were supportive advisers for my 1993 master's thesis on this topic in New York University's Anthropology Department. Thanks also to Lila Abu-Lughod, Rod Sellers, and members of the Walley family for their helpful comments on this essay. Finally, I would like to extend my appreciation to Hugh Gusterson and Catherine Besteman for creating the much-desired opportunity to revisit the issue. I am grateful for their insights and encouragement as well as for the stimulating conversation that they and other participants provided in the 2006 "What's Wrong with America" workshop held at MIT as well as the 2007 "Insecure American" panel at the American Anthropological Association meetings.

1. The Calumet is the wetland region near the southern tip of Lake Michigan that surrounds Lake Calumet and includes the Calumet River watershed. It encompasses Southeast Chicago, Northwest Indiana, and some of the south suburbs. While a few "mini-mills" and small portions of some of the older mills continued to operate after the mass shutdowns of the early 1980s, the only sizable steel mills still operating have been located in Northwest Indiana. These include U.S. Steel's historic Gary Works as well as Mittal Steel (later Arcelor-Mittal), which has come to encompass parts of the former Inland, LTV, and Bethlehem steel plants in Burns Harbor and East Chicago, Indiana. The remaining Indiana mills operate with vastly reduced workforces, the mini-mills are generally nonunion, and Mittal Steel has even reverted to the twelve-hour workday. In addition, the remaining steel companies have fought to limit benefits owed to retirees and to lower their tax rates even during times of profitability for their companies. See Eric Sergio Boria, "Borne in the Industrial Everyday: Reterritorializing Claims-Making in a Global Steel Economy" (PhD diss., Loyola University Chicago, 2006). As a consequence, I would argue that this remaining industry has done little to challenge the larger narrative of the decline of an industrial way of life in the Calumet region (see Boria for a somewhat different perspective).

2. Deborah Reed-Danahay, introduction to *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social,* ed. Deborah Reed-Danahay (New York: Berg Press, 1997), 9. For more on "autoethnography," see the other chapters in Reed-Danahay's book. See also the introduction by Mary Louise Pratt in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992); Catherine Russell, "Autoethnography: Journeys of the Self," ch. 10 in *Experimental Ethnography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); and Carolyn Ellis's *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2004).

3. Carolyn Kay Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986).

4. William Kornblum, *Blue Collar Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

5. David Bensman and Roberta Lynch, *Rusted Dreams: Hard Times in a Steel Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Gordon L. Clark, "Piercing the Corporate Veil: The Closure of Wisconsin Steel in South Chicago," *Regional Studies* 24, no. 5 (1990): 405–20.

6. One exception, however, is Bensman and Lynch's *Rusted Dreams,* which offers a more vivid sense of neighborhood life in Southeast Chicago and the demise of the steel industry than most academic accounts.

7. This quote is converted from the Swedish-inflected spelling (for example, *fju* for "few" and *wendt* for "went") for ease of reading.

8. See also Micaela DiLeonardo, "The Female World of Cards and Holidays: Women, Families and the Work of Kinship," *Signs* 12, no. 3 (1987): 440–53.

9. International Harvester (later renamed Navistar) had wanted to sell the mill but was saddled with $62 million in unfunded pension liabilities. Wisconsin's eventual sale to a tiny company with no assets (a company that was deemed an inappropriate buyer by many in the business world) theoretically insulated Harvester from its pension liabilities. However, the terms of the sale also left Harvester in control over crucial mill assets, and Harvester itself eventually triggered the collapse of the mill. For an overview of the complex—and disturbing—machinations surrounding the collapse of Wisconsin Steel, see Bensman and Lynch, *Rusted Dreams;* Clark, "Piercing the Corporate Veil"; and Thomas Geoghegan, *Which Side Are You On? Trying to Be for Labor When It's Flat on Its Back* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991).

10. Robert Bergsvik, "Rally Marks 9th Anniversary of Wisconsin Steel's Closing," *Daily Calumet,* March 29, 1989, 1. In the previous year, John F. Wasik put the number at six hundred in "End of the Line at Wisconsin Steel," *Progressive* 52 (October 1988): 15.

11. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

12. Numerous accounts of deindustrialization in Southeast Chicago noted active discrimination in hiring against former steelworkers. Because they had been unionized and earned relatively high wages, there was a perception by some that they would be "difficult" employees in service positions. For example, see the discussion in Bensman and Lynch, *Rusted Dreams,* and Geoghegan, *Which Side Are You On?*

13. For example, see Martha M. Hamilton, "Jobless Benefits," *Washington Post,* February 19, 1981, A1.

14. Lila Abu-Lughod, "Writing against Culture," in *Recapturing Anthropology,* ed. Richard G. Fox (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research, 1991), 137–62.